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Irish teens among most politically aware in world:

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IRISH TEENAGERS are some of the most politically aware in the world, according to a survey which places them seventh in a table of 36 countries.

However, the international survey on civic and citizenship education also found that almost half of teenagers surveyed did not trust the Government and more than half did not trust the media.

The study was conducted in Ireland among second-year post-primary students with an average age of 14.3 years.

Ireland came in seventh place after Finland, Denmark, the Republic of Korea, Chinese Taipei, Sweden and Poland.

The average Irish score of 534 points compares with a 576-point average in Finland and Denmark. The Dominican Republic came in last with 380 points among 36 countries.

However, despite scoring well overall, 10 per cent of Irish students recorded results below the lowest proficiency level.

The survey showed that the average 14-year-old in Ireland has a high level of support for democratic processes.

When asked a series of questions on their interest in social and political issues Irish students scored 50, the same as the international average.

Some 87 per cent of students said they intended to vote in future elections compared with an average of 81 per cent internationally. Some 82 per cent agreed that people should be free to criticise the government publicly and 94 per cent said people should be allowed to protest if they felt a law was unfair.

This compared with international averages of 78 and 92 per cent respectively.

Just over half of students, or 52 per cent, stated that they trusted the national government compared with 62 per cent of students internationally. Forty-eight per cent said they trusted the media compared to 61 per cent internationally.

Thirty per cent of Irish students reported that their parents were “very interested” in politics, higher than the international average of 23 per cent.

This correlation was noted in the survey on citizenship education for the strong association between parental interest in politics and a student’s civic knowledge.

Ireland was also one of 23 countries where students participated in a test of students' knowledge and attitudes relating to the European Union.

Irish students' performance in this area was in keeping with the European average, despite the fact that the second-year students had not yet covered the EU in civic, social and political education (CSPE), which is now an obligatory subject in the Junior Cert curriculum.

Irish students fared well when it came to basic EU facts – for example, 99 per cent knew that Ireland was a member of the EU, while 87 per cent could identify the EU flag.

However, just 56 per cent knew the number of EU member states; 49 per cent knew who voted for MEPs while just a third could identify a requirement for a country to be allowed join the EU.

Irish students did not compare well with their European counterparts when it came to language skills – 23 per cent of students said they could not communicate in or understand another European language compared to just 12 per cent in other European countries.

The Irish survey was carried out by the Educational Research Centre of St Patrick's College, Drumcondra on behalf of the Department of Education surveying 3,400 second-year students, 1,900 teachers and 145 schools.

It was carried out in spring 2009, before the current political and economic crisis.

In total, 140,000 students and 62,000 teachers participated in the study under the auspices of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement in 38 countries, 36 of which were included in the table having had acceptable student samples.